

RAC Dalton Highway Field Tour

Meeting Minutes and Trip Report

July 9-11, 2003



Wednesday, July 9, 2003

RAC member Charlie Boddy arranged a tour of Fort Knox Gold Mine outside Fairbanks. Boddy and fellow RAC members Susan Olsen, Paul Roehl and Steve Simmons, and BLM national RAC coordinator Twinkle Thompson (Office of the Director) and Alaska RAC coordinator Teresa McPherson participated.

Fort Knox Environmental Manager Clyde Gillespie provided a guided tour for the group (see trip photo log). He explained that Fort Knox Gold Mine, located about 25 miles northeast of Fairbanks, is the largest gold-producing mine in the state. Fort Knox is an open pit mine where dirt and gravel is crushed, ground and mixed with water and chemicals to extract the gold. Fort Knox produces about 350,000 ounces of gold each year.

Tour participants observed the daily blast at the site (see photos) where active mining occurs and then toured Fort Knox by vans to look at several former mine sites that have been successfully reclaimed. From there, the group toured the mill where processing occurs and the control center where sophisticated electronics run the mill's extensive network of equipment.

The tour concluded at 4:30 PM and the group returned to Fairbanks to overnight at Pike's Waterfront Lodge.

Thursday, July 10, 2003

Remaining Anchorage RAC members and BLM representatives flew to Fairbanks the morning of July 10 to join participants from the previous day. All participants met at Fairbanks International Airport to depart via charter.

Dalton Highway/Coldfoot participants

RAC members:

Charlie Boddy
Gary Gustafson
Sandra Key
Susan Olsen

BLM/Other:

Henri Bisson, State Director
Twinkle Thompson, Office of the Director
June Bailey, Anchorage Field Office
Ramone McCoy, Glennallen Field Office

Jim Posey
Paul Roehl
Steve Simmons
Larry Taylor
David van den Berg, Chair

Bob Schneider, Northern Field Office
Linda Billingsley, Northern Field Office
Jody Weil, External Affairs
Teresa McPherson, External Affairs (recorder)
Mike Wrabetz, Joint Pipeline Office

After collecting bag lunches at Slate Creek Inn, the group departed by vans for a placer mine on the Hammond River. While en route, BLM natural resource specialist Linda Billingsley explained mining operations in the area and reclamation work at various sites along the road.

The group observed placer miner **Ralph Hamm** work his claim near the river (see photos), and then spoke with Hamm about his claims.

The group then drove to Wiseman for a council meeting and informal open discussion with local residents at the Wiseman Community Center.

The chair called the meeting to order at 1:30 PM.

Chair David van den Berg welcomed Wiseman residents, advisory council members, and BLM managers and staff. The chair explained the council would reserve regular council business for later in the meeting, and open with informal public comment.

Jack Reakoff introduced himself as a trapper, rural guide, federal subsistence user and member of the Western Interior Subsistence Regional Advisory Council. Reakoff discussed correspondence between his council and the BLM regarding the number of guides who use BLM lands in the area.

Reakoff said the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have a selection process that regulates the number of guides. He said the State and BLM do not control guide numbers, and was concerned about overharvesting, lack of law enforcement presence to enforce hunting regulations, and the need for more data on harvest levels.

Henri Bisson said BLM would review correspondence from Reakoff's council and respond, and may enlist the BLM RAC's input on the issue. Bisson said BLM would want a full public process before deciding to pursue guide limits, and added that Reakoff and his council might help with that process.

Bisson said the issue was similar to the heliski issue in some parts of the state where BLM worked with local communities and public land user groups to come up with some controls. He said BLM might look at a similar process for resolving guide issues.

The BLM RAC asked for copies of all correspondence between BLM and the subsistence council. BLM agreed to do so, as well as any future correspondence on this issue.

Reakoff also addressed the topic of development along the Dalton Highway. He suggested BLM engage local residents for input prior to decisions about the corridor. He said most people did not favor more development along the highway. They want to see wilderness and wildlife, not signs and infrastructure. He said he was not opposed to mining activities and said the area's rich mining history is part of its appeal. However, he asked that BLM keep development along the corridor to a minimum and engage local people in decisions that affect them.

Reakoff thanked BLM and the Resource Advisory Council for visiting Wiseman and meeting with residents.

Heidi Schoppenhorst introduced herself as a resident of Wiseman who works for the National Park Service at the Coldfoot Visitor Center. She said visitors like the lack of development, signs and infrastructure, they like the rustic 'wild' quality of the area.

Council members asked residents if they felt there was a need for additional cabins in the area. Reakoff said many visitors to Wiseman and Coldfoot are campers, and said he's not heard support for additional cabins, roads or trails.

Susan Olsen noted that BLM's Dalton Highway Recreation Plan had estimated visitation figures much higher than actual figures. She asked if BLM would scale back some of the planned visitor services accordingly.

Bob Schneider said actual visitor use data would drive the type of visitor services BLM considers. He said as more of the highway is paved, visitation will increase, but BLM will be cautious about how we spend development dollars since funding is difficult to come by.

There was no additional public comment, so the council began its regular meeting.

State Director's Update

Henri Bisson reported on a number of ongoing items from the April RAC meeting.

- The **Alaska Standards and Guidelines** are currently being reviewed by Bureau officials, who asked for cosmetic changes to the document. Bisson said he hoped the document would soon be in the hands of Department reviewers, but he could not give a timeframe.

Gary Gustafson expressed the RAC's frustration over the pace of the review and approval process. Sandra Key suggested the RAC request to meet with the Director when she comes to Alaska later this summer.

Bisson said he would welcome a letter from the RAC expressing their views regarding the delay. Gustafson volunteered to draft a letter for the RAC's review. Twinkle Thompson said she would look into why the review process was taking so long.

- The State's application for a **recordable disclaimer of interest** for riverbeds in the Black River is currently under 90-day public review. This is the first of many such applications BLM expects to receive from the State.
- BLM met recently with the Alaska Federation of Natives to discuss the '**2009' conveyance program**. Legislation drafted by BLM at the Senator's request will make it easier to move toward completing all land entitlements by 2009.

Steve Simmons said the RAC had not heard back from BLM regarding the ANCSA taxation issue discussed at the last council meeting. Bisson said BLM had researched this provision of ANCSA, and would forward information to the RAC immediately.

- BLM published a request for proposals for the **Northeast NPR-A plan amendment**. The goal is to have one set of operating procedures for all of NPR-A. BLM is analyzing comments and selecting a preferred alternative for the draft **Northwest NPR-A plan**. The Record of Decision is due out in December 2003, with a possible lease sale in June 2004.
- Bisson said BLM favors a preferred alternative that would make all the **Colville River Special Area** available for leasing with a one-mile no surface occupancy stipulation. However, BLM has several options when it comes to leasing in the part of the Colville drainage included in the Northwest NPR-A planning area. BLM will start the South NPR-A plan next year and will look at the majority of the Colville River Special Area at that time.

RAC subgroup reports

- OHV subgroup: Susan Olsen said the OHV subgroup was waiting for feedback from BLM about how the subgroup could factor into BLM's OHV planning process. Bisson said his state recreation program lead was on a Washington, DC, detail at present, and asked the subgroup to give BLM a little more time to address this question.

Ramone McCoy said the Glennallen Field Office would welcome the RAC's involvement in reviewing OHV guidelines in the East Alaska Resource Management Plan.

- Outdated segregations subgroup: Henri Bisson said BLM is working with the State to prioritize the D-1 selections in the Bristol Bay pilot area. In other areas, the land use planning processes currently underway will resolve unnecessary segregations.
- RMP subgroup: David van den Berg reported that the RMP subgroup held a teleconference earlier in the week and had requested some information from Henri Bisson. The subgroup wants to be involved early in all land use planning processes. Bisson suggested a starting point would be to have the appropriate field manager make initial contact with the subgroup following public scoping to enlist the RAC's help.

RAC letter regarding Alaska Standards and Guidelines

Gary Gustafson read a draft letter to the Secretary asking for resolution of the Alaska RAC's Standards and Guidelines. Bisson suggested the RAC address the letter to Director Kathleen Clark, since she has made an effort to revitalize the RACs. The council agreed to this approach.

Oil spill response presentation

Environmental protection specialist Mike Wrabetz of the Joint Pipeline Office gave an overview of oil spill prevention, preparedness and response procedures.

- Wrabetz explained that the Clean Water Act, the Trans Alaska Pipeline System agreement and grant of right of way, and State statutes all required area-wide hazmat and oil spill response planning.
- Industry is responsible for facility-specific prevention and preparedness and oil spill response planning, with government oversight. All plans are reviewed and approved by BLM, DEC, EPA and DOT.
- BLM (JPO) coordinates review of the TAPS plan, provides coordinated oversight of TAPS preparedness and prevention measures, and oversight of TAPS oil spill response. Federal and State on-scene coordinators provide agency oversight of the response through a unified command under the Incident Command System. The unified command includes a responsible party Incident Commander.

Council members asked how Alyeska performed during the pipeline shooting incident of October 4, 2001. Wrabetz said the response overall was pretty good. He said due to concerns about vapors from this type spill, Alyeska flew a specialist up from the Lower 48 to assess the situation. So there were some time delays, but he said overall it was a good response.

Jack Reakoff said Wiseman residents have not been engaged in any public process to address oil spill issues. He said small communities don't have access to many public hearings, and the best way to get involve those communities is to visit them, especially those along the Dalton Highway. Nolan Heath of the Joint Pipeline Office said he would relay this concern to Alyeska.

The meeting adjourned at 4:15 PM.

Following the meeting, Jack Reakoff led BLM and the council on a short walking tour of the community of Wiseman (see photos).

The group then returned to Coldfoot for dinner. After dinner, BLM interpretive specialist Lenore Heppler led the group on a tour of the new Arctic Interagency Visitor Center (see photo). The group also attended the evening program at Coldfoot Visitor Center, where interpretive specialist Lisa Jodwalis gave a slide presentation on the arctic environment.

The group then returned to Slate Creek Inn.

Friday, July 11, 2003

At 8:30 AM, the group departed Coldfoot for Toolik Lake with brief stops en route at BLM's Marion Creek administrative site, Gold Creek Trail and Atigun Pass. Alyeska safety manager **Dave Brown** accompanied the group and gave a short overview of Alyeska's safety program for the Dalton Highway corridor.

Participants arrived at Toolik Field Station at 1:15 PM. During lunch at the field station's dining facility, Toolik science director **Donie Bret-Harte** provided an overview of the long-term arctic research conducted at the field station. Following lunch, she took the group on a walking tour of the station and explained the field test plots where arctic vegetation research is ongoing. She explained the significance of this research in understanding long-term ecological changes in the arctic environment.

At 3:30 PM the group departed Toolik Field Station for Galbraith Lake airstrip. Participants returned to Fairbanks International via Frontier Flying Service.

Anchorage participants continued on to Anchorage via Alaska Airlines.

Tour concluded upon arrival at Fairbanks International Airport (5:30 PM) or Anchorage's Ted Stevens International Airport (7:50 PM).